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CIA Opening New Inquiry On Contra Aid

Staff Given Chance To Revise Statements

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The Central Intelligence Agency inspector general's office is reexamining whether the agency's covert operations supporting the Nicaraguan rebels in 1985 and 1986 violated congressional bans against giving the contra forces direct or indirect military assistance, according to congressional sources.

As part of the new inquiry, the acting director of the agency, Robert M. Gates, has told his staff they can have a second chance to revise what they told the inspector general's office when the matter was first investigated last year, the sources said.

The first inquiry began last fall and was expanded in December after discovery of notes in the National Security Council files that showed some CIA personnel in Central America taking directions from an NSC aide, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, and filing reports back to him. North was fired from the NSC after he admitted diverting funds from clandestine arms sales to Iran to aid the contras.

Gates, who was nominated by President Reagan to succeed the ailing William J. Casey as CIA director, told congressional sources last week he was "not satisfied" with some of the statements given the inspector general's office during his initial inquiry, which is why he offered agency personnel a chance to revise their original stories.

Gates, who faces a tough confirmation hearing beginning Feb. 17 before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, has already been told by House and Senate members that the agency's contra operations will be the subject of extensive congressional investigation.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), according to Senate sources, has sent word to Gates that his staff has information that CIA officials last spring used the threat to withhold supplies as the means of isolating Eden Pastora, a contra leader. "The agency controlled the airdrops," a Senate aide said yesterday.

A Helms aide sat in on a meeting last year where a CIA supervisor discussed both military and nonmilitary assistance to contra forces, according to congressional sources. At the time, a congressionally imposed ban on direct or indirect U.S. military aid to the contras was in effect.

While Casey was CIA director, agency personnel in Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica "were pretty loose" in providing assistance and direction to the contra forces, one House member said last week.

Though CIA operatives were barred from giving any military-related aid in 1985, a January 1986 presidential intelligence finding enabled them to provide intelligence data and communications training to the contras last year. Casey expanded covert CIA operations on behalf of the contras under the authority granted by that finding.

The agency inspector general's inquiry is directed at reports that agency personnel coordinated delivery of privately funded arms for the contras, sources said. One congressional aide said yesterday that the agency had "people on the ground with the contra forces during the entire period."

The Miami Herald yesterday quoted an unidentified intelligence officer as saying that Casey assisted North in providing all types of assistance to the contras. "Without Casey's help at every stage, Ollie North would not have been able to do any of what he did for the contras," the officer was quoted as saying.

Casey was frequently questioned by the House and Senate intelligence committees last year about CIA aid to the contras, sources said.

"Casey could tell you volumes on the Sandinistas," a House member said, "but he professed to know nothing about the contras because the agency was not tasked to look into them. Of course Casey did the tasking."

Some congressional sources see Gates' action in promoting a reinvestigation as part of his campaign to get confirmed by the Senate. The

agency's contra activities have always been controversial on Capitol Hill and Casey often failed to respond to questions posed to him on the subject.

The CIA station chief in Costa Rica, who goes by the name of A Tomas Castillo, was recalled to Washington last month and reportedly now has been given early retirement, according to sources. CIA spokesman George Lauder has refused to comment on Castillo.

The Senate intelligence committee report on the Iran-contra affair said a "senior CIA officer," which sources identified as Castillo, was "the subject of an internal CIA investigation initiated in the fall of 1986 concerning unauthorized contacts with private supporters of the Nicaraguan resistance."

Some of Casey's top deputies have been involved over the past five years in the contra operation and could be drawn into the agency and congressional probes.

A Duane (Dewey) Clarridge was selected by Casey in 1981 to handle the Caribbean area at the start of the Reagan administration. He developed the contra force in the early 1980s and was involved in preparation of the controversial 1984 contra manual that alluded to assassination, and in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors that led to the congressional ban on military assistance to the rebels.

Clarridge also was the CIA official to whom North turned in November 1985 when he sought agency help in getting an Israeli arms shipment to Iran.

Clarridge has testified before the Senate intelligence panel on the Iran affair.

Yesterday, United Press International quoted Rep. Norman Y. Mineta (D-Calif.) as saying that when the House intelligence committee looked into the origins of the 1984 manual, Clarridge initially denied he had played any part in its preparation. Later, he acknowledged planning and approving it "once he saw we had all the goods on him," Mineta said.

Members of the House panel were later "incensed," Mineta said, when they found out Clarridge was not going to be disciplined along with lower-level CIA operatives.